

## TWO FORMS OF LOVE

### The Problem of Preferential Love in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*

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#### ABSTRACT

The duty to love one's neighbor as oneself is at the core of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. In this book, Kierkegaard unfolds the meaning of neighborly love and claims that it is the only valid form of true love. He contrasts between neighborly love and preferential love (which includes romantic love and friendship) and criticizes the latter for being nothing but a form of selfishness. However, in some contexts, Kierkegaard seems to acknowledge the significance of preferential love relationships, and does not disallow them. Therefore, his understanding of preferential love appears to be confused and inconsistent. My essay discusses the tension in Kierkegaard's position regarding preferential love, and by presenting recent readings of *Works of Love*, it asks whether this tension is resolvable and offers a suggestion for a possible solution.

KEY WORDS: *Kierkegaard, M. Jamie Ferreira, preferential love, neighborly love, faith, Works of Love*

*WORKS OF LOVE*, a pivotal religious-philosophical treatise, was written by Kierkegaard in 1847 at the borderline between his early writings and what is known as his "second authorship." *Works of Love* was published under Kierkegaard's name (and not pseudonymously like many of his early writings), and it is Christian in character. It discusses the subject matter of love (love for God and love for the neighbor) and focuses on questions regarding the relation between the self and the other. However, despite its undeniable ethical tone, this work expresses a deep ambivalence toward human, preferential love (and specifically romantic love and friendship). Kierkegaard is very clear in his reservations concerning this kind of love, and he explicitly contrasts it with Christian (or neighborly) love. At the same time, Kierkegaard does not wish to claim that Christian love prohibits special relations with "preferred" neighbors (such as one's beloved or friend, parent or child) and thus we find, side by side, condemnations and affirmations of preferential love. There is an evident tension between the different

attitudes Kierkegaard expresses in *Works of Love* with regard to preferential love; in what follows, I wish to address this tension and to explore the possibility of resolving it. Furthermore, I wish to use this discussion for addressing the fundamental problem at the basis of Kierkegaard's ambivalence: can neighborly love be at the same time preferential?

## 1. The Problem

Erotic love is based on a drive that, transfigured into an inclination, has its . . . expression in this—there is but one and only one beloved in the whole world. . . . Christian love teaches us to love all people, unconditionally all [Kierkegaard 1995, 49].

Erotic love and friendship are preferential love and the passion of preferential love; *Christian love is self-denial's love* [1995, 52].

Kierkegaard draws a clear division here between preferential love and Christian love. The division is defined as follows: erotic love and friendship belong to the category of preferential love, which is characterized by exclusivity (“there is but one and only one beloved”) and is based on preference, while the other category—that of Christian love—is characterized by equality (“teaches us to love all people”) and is based on self-denial. Christian love is the love expressed in the commandment “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), and this “shall,” this duty, is “the very mark of Christian love” (Kierkegaard 1995, 24). Christian love is therefore the duty to love the neighbor, *any neighbor*, as one loves oneself, while preferential love is the love directed at *one special neighbor* who, by virtue of preference, has a different status than all the other neighbors. For the sake of simplicity, and to keep the division as clear as possible, I will refer to Christian love as *neighborly* love and to preferential love, occasionally, as *special* love (I will also refer to “romantic” love as a typical representative of this category). Why does Kierkegaard consider these two kinds of love—the neighborly and the preferential—to be so distinctively different?

Kierkegaard continually restricts his reservation toward preferential loves to the way “the poet understands them” (1995, 50). That is to say (at least on the face of it), preferential love is excluded from the category of neighborly love only as far as it is understood in the way the poet understands it. We can therefore read between the lines that erotic love and friendship are not dismissed altogether but only as long as they are understood in the non-Christian (or “pagan” as Kierkegaard calls it) manner of the poet. This, of course, paves the way for the affirmation of a different—that is, Christian, neighborly—understanding of preferential love, but it raises two questions that

need to be answered. First, what is wrong with the pagan understanding of preferential love? Second, what is the alternative, or what does the new, *neighborly* manifestation of preferential love look like? In my view, although Kierkegaard answers the first question, he does not—and, if he wants to be consistent, *cannot*—give a satisfactory answer to the second. However, let us begin with the first question: what is wrong with the pagan understanding of preferential love?

“[W]hat paganism called love, as distinguished from self-love, was preference. But . . . passionate preference is essentially another form of self-love” (1995, 53). Paganism, Kierkegaard explains, distinguishes between self-love and true love by recognizing the latter in the passionate preference of erotic love and friendship: to love passionately one’s beloved or friend is to love another person (rather than oneself) and therefore it is (true) love (and not self-love). However, in sharp contrast with paganism, Christianity considers preferential love—the passionate love for one’s beloved or friend—to be “another form of self-love.” Christianity “has misgivings about erotic love and friendship,” then, because Christianity rejects self-love (1995, 53). It is the element of *selfishness* in preferential love that neighborly love—which is, after all, *self-denial’s* love—wishes “to root out”: “*only when one loves the neighbor, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out,*” Kierkegaard says at the very beginning of the deliberation (1995, 44). But what constitutes the element of selfishness in preferential love? In an earlier stage of the book, Kierkegaard declares:

What a difference there is between the play of feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions, in short, that play of the powers of immediacy, that celebrated glory of poetry in smiles or in tears, in desire or in want—what a difference between this and the earnestness of eternity, the earnestness of the commandment in spirit and truth, in honesty and self-denial! [1995, 25].

It seems reasonable to assume that Kierkegaard considers those elements (“feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions . . . the powers of immediacy”) to constitute the selfishness that distinguishes between preferential love and neighborly love because they are indeed concerned exclusively with the self and its gratification. Moreover, this fits in well with the logic that differentiates between preferential love and neighborly love. We saw above that Kierkegaard defines neighborly love as *self-denial’s* love and this, quite reasonably, must oppose the kind of love that is focused on the self. Are we to conclude, then, that inclinations and desires and everything connected to the well-being of the self are to be eliminated if one is to love properly (in the neighborly way)? Is the self simply to be denied? The picture is more complicated than that. After all, the self plays a crucial part in the commandment

that reads “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*.” There is a need, then, to distinguish between at least two different ways of relating to the self, between two kinds of self-love: the kind of self-love referred to in the commandment, and the kind of self-love Kierkegaard considers as selfish.

### 1.1 *Different kinds of self-love*

What does it mean to love somebody as one loves oneself? What does it mean to love oneself in a (proper) way that can and should be applied in our relation to the neighbor? I follow M. Jamie Ferreira’s suggestion to understand this kind of self-love in terms of respect and of wishing the good for ourselves, and I accept her emphasis on the importance of noting the distinction that Kierkegaard makes between “selfish self-love” and “proper self-love.”<sup>1</sup> Ferreira explains the difference between these two self-loves as follows: “Kierkegaard distinguishes between two forms of self-love: a ‘selfish,’ exclusive love of self, which is at odds with the good of the other, and a ‘proper,’ inclusive love of self, which both encompasses the good of the other and is the measure of the good of the other” (Ferreira 2001, 35).

However, is this a satisfactory characterization? Is the criterion included here—that is, not to be “at odds with the good of the other”—accurate enough to distinguish unselfish, proper self-love from selfish, improper self-love? Taking this as our guiding rule does not explain, for example, why passionate romantic love (in its being “the play of feelings, drives, inclinations, and passions”) is considered by Kierkegaard to be selfish.<sup>2</sup> After all, from the point of view of one’s neighbor, there is nothing offensive (in terms of respect and wishing his well-being) in loving one’s beloved passionately. It seems that Kierkegaard’s objection to preferential love goes beyond a strictly blatant violation of the good of the neighbor. In order to understand what might be the problematic element in preferential love, we need to qualify the differences between selfish self-love and proper self-love more carefully, and distinguish among *three* kinds of self-love:

[a] *Selfish self-love*—self-love which is indeed “at odds with the good of the other”: using the other as a means for one’s selfish satisfactions or acting toward achieving one’s own good regardless of the effect it has on the other.

<sup>1</sup> See Ferreira 2001, 31–34. I refer in detail to Ferreira’s interpretation in section two below.

<sup>2</sup> See, again, the quotation from *Works of Love* above that contrasts between this kind of love and the “true,” “earnest,” Christian love.

[b] *Proper qualified self-love*—a restricted form of self-love, which is the self-love referred to in the commandment. This kind of self-love is understood in terms of respect and wishing one's well-being, in a *narrow sense* of "well-being" (a well-being stripped of most of its "embodied" aspects, such as responsiveness and sensitivity to inclinations, desires, and preferences).

[c] *Proper unqualified self-love*—acting to fulfill one's well-being, in a *broader sense* of "well-being" (which includes sensitivity to the self's inclinations, desires, and preferences), with a constant consideration of the good of the other. That is, fulfilling one's own "self-focused" concerns as long as they are *not* "at odds with the good of the other."

On the face of it, self-love [b] and self-love [c] seem to be very close to each other; there is no contradiction between the elements constituting the broader kind of self-love (elements concerned with satisfying one's inclinations and desires, the basis for preferential love), and those constituting the narrower one (elements concerned with respect for the self and for the other). The seemingly reasonable combination of these two kinds of self-love is the grounds for the justification of preferential love to be found later in the text.

However, as I aim to show, the two cannot really be in harmony from Kierkegaard's point of view. Neighborly love, which is self-denial's love, can work well with self-love only when self-love is understood in the manner of [b]. Of course, this does not mean that self-love in the manner of [c] should be ruled out. However, as long as *self-denial* is the dominant structure of the love that Kierkegaard advocates here, self-love in the manner of [c]—self-love that is concerned *also* with the gratification of one's self-focused wishes, even if it does not come at the expense of the other—should at least be set aside as marginal or secondary. In other words, even if self-love in the manner of [c] is not explicitly condemned by Kierkegaard, he implicitly expresses ambivalence toward it.

We get the impression that from Kierkegaard's point of view, desires and feelings and inclinations are some things that he needs to tolerate. He has no choice but to accept them because he definitely does not wish to ignore or deny our corporeal, worldly existence (see, for example, 1995, 52)—but it is hard to say that he does this enthusiastically. In *Works of Love*, I claim, Kierkegaard is reluctant to endorse what I will later call a "full concreteness" of the self: a concreteness that is manifested in the embodiment of the self, whose spirituality is expressed also in a worldly, "natural" (bodily and self-related) manner. This ambivalence toward the self is at the root of Kierkegaard's ambivalence toward preferential love. The crux of the matter, then, is the contrast, or at least the tension, between a *denial* of the self (the

basis for neighborly love), and an affirmation—a *full* affirmation—of it (the basis for preferential love). Does Kierkegaard allow for an affirmation that *unapologetically* takes into consideration self-concerned, “natural,” and “spontaneous” desires, or does he ultimately consider this aspect of the self to be “selfish”?<sup>3</sup>

To love the neighbor, however, is self-denial’s love, and self-denial simply drives out all preferential love just as it drives out all self-love. . . . Even if passionate preference had no other selfishness in it, it would still have this, that consciously or unconsciously there is self-willfulness in it [Kierkegaard 1995, 55].

[I]n preferential love there is a natural determinant (drive, inclination) and self-love. . . . The spirit’s love, in contrast, takes away from myself all natural determinants and all self-love [1995, 56].

It seems that for Kierkegaard any form of preference, by virtue of the “natural determinants” that characterize it, amounts to selfishness—even if only in the form of “self-willfulness,” as he says, without justifying this problematic statement. (After all, it is true that preference is related to identification and manifestation of one’s will—but does this necessarily amount to “self-willfulness”? Sensitivity to one’s wishes and desires, sensitivity to “what one wants,” is not essentially connected to a blatant, non-humble, and selfish assertion of the will, as Kierkegaard’s use of “self-willfulness” here implies.) Accordingly, Kierkegaard seems to posit “spirit’s love” against “all self-love” and by doing this to rule out the possibility of unqualified self-love—self-love [c], self-love that includes attention to “natural determinants” such as desires, feelings, and inclinations.

*Works of Love* is rich in critical denunciations of preferential love. At the same time, it is clear that Kierkegaard wishes to affirm the special relationships we all have in our lives with members of our families, with lovers, and with friends. He says:

[L]ove the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbor be the sanctifying element in your union’s covenant with God. Love your friend honestly and devotedly, but let love for the neighbor be what you learn from each other in your friendship’s confidential relationship with God! [1995, 62].

<sup>3</sup> To avoid confusion, whenever referring to the self-love related to the fully affirmed self, that is, the self-love that Kierkegaard is ambivalent about, I will use the qualification “self-love [c].”

Kierkegaard's welcoming of preferential love is quite evident here; he explicitly posits it on the side of neighborly love and declares the possibility of their coexistence. However, his former (and persistent) opposing between preferential and neighborly loves indicates his ambivalence toward "unqualified" self-love—and toward preferential love (to which self-love [c] is the basis) thereby. Although Kierkegaard accepts the kind of self-love that allows for giving attention to one's bodily and emotional good, his heart, so to speak, is in the self-love of the commandment (the kind of self-love that allows only for a partial self, a self whose principal relation to himself is that of denial, and whose love for himself basically amounts to a "feeling" of respect). This ambivalence results in a series of assertions regarding preferential love that are undoubtedly in tension with each other. How are we to address this tension?

### 1.2 *Is the tension in Kierkegaard's position resolvable?*

Kierkegaard's harsh attitude toward preferential love in the context of *Works of Love* has earned him, more than once, the severe charge of presenting an inhuman and undesirable model of love.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, on the other hand, several impressive attempts have been made to amend *Works of Love's* notorious reputation and to bring into light its edifying nature and its important insights regarding human love. However, despite this growing awareness of *Works of Love*, the problem of Kierkegaard's understanding of preferential love has not received the attention it deserves. Researchers either focus their attention on the moral and religious nature of neighborly love alone, or, on the relatively rare occasions where romantic (meaning, preferential) love is the focus of the research, the tension in Kierkegaard's position concerning this kind of love is quite disregarded.<sup>5</sup>

An example of a study, which though acknowledging the tension in Kierkegaard's understanding of preferential love refrains from giving it the thorough consideration it requires is Sylvia Walsh's 1988 piece "Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard's Thought." In this essay, Walsh emphasizes that Kierkegaard does not object to preferential loves as such but only to the element of selfishness in them. This selfishness, according to Walsh's understanding, does *not* consist in our "natural inclinations, needs, and desires" (1988, 239);

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Adorno 1940; Singer 1987; and Løgstrup 1997.

<sup>5</sup> See Green and Ellis 1999; Hall 2002 as examples for the latter. These studies take neighborly love to be the essential model for romantic love, and do not pay enough attention to the inconsistency in Kierkegaard's position with regard to the relations between these two manifestations of love.

therefore, a purified preferential love is the form that neighborly love takes in the context of our special, “natural” loves. At the same time, however, Walsh admits that this model is not entirely affirmed by Kierkegaard and she acknowledges that “there appears to be a certain ambivalence toward natural love in Kierkegaard’s thought. He says that Christianity is not opposed to natural inclination as such, only to the selfishness in it, yet he does not seem to recognize any ability on the part of natural love to love unselfishly” (1988, 248).

Moreover, Walsh importantly asks whether preferential loves, by virtue of their *preference*, do not “remain fundamentally selfish in nature” (1988, 240). I suppose she means selfishness in the sense of what I have termed self-love [c], and her answer reflects her own ambivalence with regard to the significance and value of preferential loves. After all, it is the element of preference in our special loves that establishes the uniqueness, *the different nature*, of those loves directed at their “preferred” objects (the beloved, the friend, and so on). However, Walsh, despite conceding to the essentiality of preference in these loves, presents the difference created by preference as inessential—“[W]hile we certainly love persons in our special relations differently from the way we love others . . . this difference is not essential, since we love them fundamentally as we love others, that is, as a neighbor” (1988, 241).

Walsh, then, considers preferential loves to be only an inessential expression of neighborly love, which means not only a marginalizing of preferential loves but also a disregarding of the fundamental clash between equality (the demand of neighborly love) and preference (the demand of special love). Accordingly, she can state, “This [neighborly love] seems to be for Kierkegaard the decisive factor in the transformation of erotic love that rids it of selfish exclusivity and establishes equality in love while preserving special relations” (1988, 241). However, this leaves us with two, related problems. First, can we really rid ourselves of what Kierkegaard tends to understand as “selfishness” without this resulting in the elimination of the special, “natural” (preferential) loves that we want to keep (since, as we saw above, it seems that Kierkegaard is reluctant to unequivocally affirm as unselfish desires and inclinations and preferences—that is, everything that constitutes natural, preferential, special loves as such)? Second, how can the same love (neighborly love) be at the same time equal and special? If neighborly love should be directed equally at everybody, what does this love look like when it is directed at those special people in our lives? Is this love still the same? What then makes this special love *special*? To put it as succinctly as possible: can we really keep our special (meaning, preferential and supposedly “selfish”) loves in the framework of being allowed to love only in a neighborly (meaning, equal and self-denying) manner?



In my view, this twofold problem (which is of course essentially connected to Kierkegaard's ambivalence with regard to self-love) stands at the basis of Kierkegaard's conflicting understanding of preferential love and explains the tension in his position. Is this tension resolvable? An in-depth treatment of this problem was made by Ferreira in her commentary on *Works of Love. Love's Grateful Striving* (2001) is extensive, detailed, and the most comprehensive study of *Works of Love* thus far, including an all-embracing response to the variety of former readings of this book. Accordingly, in the argument I put forward here against Kierkegaard, Ferreira will be my most important opponent.

## 2. M. Jamie Ferreira's Reading of Preferential Love

### 2.1 *A matter of equality*

What is at stake for Kierkegaard is not that preferential love should be excluded but that it should not be the determinant of responsibility for the other. The discussion of preference is meant to show that love that is restricted to preference will not apprehend people as equals [Ferreira 2001, 46].

According to Ferreira, Kierkegaard's assertions against preferential love should be interpreted as attesting to his concern with equality and *not* as a manifestation of his rejection of preferential love. Indeed, Ferreira has a solid textual ground for declaring that "Kierkegaard is offering neither an attack on all self-love nor a denial of the legitimate role of preference and inclination in erotic love and friendship" (2001, 44)—but can she reconcile the latter (textual indications as to the legitimacy of preferential love) with the former (assertions against preferential love)?

Ferreira's claim is that "[l]ove of neighbor is distinguished from preferential love precisely because neighbor is the category of equality before God and preferential love does not do justice to equality" (2001, 44). Therefore, the emphasis in the text should be understood as an emphasis against loving *only* by way of preferential love. The danger that Kierkegaard is pointing out here, Ferreira says, is the danger of restricting ourselves to loving only those we are inclined to love, only those we love naturally and easily—that is, only those we love preferentially (2001, 46, 52). The warnings against preferential love, then, are warnings against exclusion. Since "[t]he radical commitment to human equality" is the crucial thing for Kierkegaard, "at the heart of Kierkegaard's ethic" (2001, 47), his negative position against preferential love should not be understood as an unequivocal rejection of

preferential love but rather as an indication of “the obligation to care for all without exclusion” (2001, 44).

Ferreira, then, takes the antagonism in Kierkegaard’s discussion of preferential love and reads it as an affirmation of the importance of equality in his ethics. In a sense, she turns the “no” (to preferential love) into a “yes” (to equality) and thus finds a way to reconcile Kierkegaard’s initial rejection of preferential love with his later affirmation of the same thing. Preferential love is not rejected for being preferential but only for the danger it posits to our duty to love *everybody* with no exception. Therefore, as long as we are guided by this duty, there is nothing wrong with preferential love. We are allowed to love “preferentially,” as long as we (first and foremost) love dutifully. On the face of it, this seems to be a reasonable demand. It sounds perfectly plausible to affirm preferential love as long as we have neighborly love as the basis on which we construct, as it were, our preferential loves. However, what does this really mean? Can it really work—can preferential love be subsumed under neighborly love without compromising either the meaning of preferential love (as *preferential*) or the rigorousness of the “commitment to human equality”? If we expect neighborly love—which is presented by Kierkegaard as *essentially non-preferential*—to present the general structure of love, to constitute the essential model for love, what does this imply with regard to the *essential element of preferentiality* in special loves? To say that love is essentially non-preferential and yet that one of its manifestations is preferential is to contradict oneself.

Neither Kierkegaard nor Ferreira refers to this contradiction that seems to be implied by their suggestion. Therefore, although I agree with Ferreira that Kierkegaard indeed affirms preferential love, I do not agree with her that this affirmation is consistent with his basic position. If taken seriously, I claim, the “radical commitment to equality” that *Works of Love* posits as *the ground for any form of love* implies the exclusion of preferential love.

## 2.2 Does Works of Love allow for equality and preference to coincide?<sup>6</sup> *An answer to Ferreira*

Kierkegaard is very specific about the meaning of neighborly love with regard to equality and preference:

*Love for the neighbor is therefore the eternal equality in loving, but the eternal equality is the opposite of preference. . . . Equality is simply not to make distinctions, and eternal equality is unconditionally not to make*

<sup>6</sup> See Ferreira 2001, 45.

the slightest distinction, unqualifiedly not to make the slightest distinction. Preference, on the other hand, is to make distinctions; passionate preference is unqualifiedly to make distinctions [1995, 58].

With Ferreira's defense of Kierkegaard in mind, as well as Kierkegaard's own words in favor of preferential love, how are we to understand the above uncompromising demand for equality that presents preferential love as being at odds with neighborly love? Moreover, Kierkegaard makes it clear, and reasonably so, that loving preferentially means to posit one person above all the rest. Erotic love and friendship, he states, are "based on preference: to love this one person above all others, to love him in contrast to all others. . . . The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion" (1995, 19).

Thus, if loving equally means "not to make exceptions" and this means precisely that one must not accept any hierarchy in the way one loves, how can preferential love be affirmed in the framework of neighborly love? To address this same matter from a slightly different angle, let us remind ourselves of Ferreira's explanation. As we saw in the previous section, she contends that preferential love is acceptable as long as it does not abuse my general duty toward the neighbor. In other words, to love preferentially is adequate on the condition that it does not "blind" me to the neighbor's needs.<sup>7</sup> However, according to this criterion, it is not clear why Kierkegaard should be worried about the possibility of loving one person above everyone else. On the face of it, loving one's beloved more than or above one's neighbor does not mean—at least not *necessarily*—that one is blind toward one's neighbor. One can love one's beloved "above all others" and yet be sensitive and responsible and caring for one's neighbor and help him in his need. There is no contradiction here. Kierkegaard, however, insists that there is. Note that he couples "above all others" with "in contrast to all others"; in his view, to love someone "more" necessarily entails blindness toward the rest. What does he mean by that? I think we can see the problem he is referring to by imagining a simple situation, familiar from our daily experience.

The duty to love my annoying neighbor from upstairs means that despite his being rude and noisy and unpleasant, despite the fact that I do not really like him, I have a duty to care about him, to see him as an equal human being, to feel compassion toward him and to help him if he is in need. Now, suppose that I have not only been afflicted with a disagreeable neighbor but also blessed with a good friend that I love

<sup>7</sup> See Ferreira's discussion of "The Blindness of Preference" (2001, 50–52).

dearly. Loving my friend preferentially *does not mean* that I am blind to my upstairs neighbor and that if he needed help I would not give this help to him. However, loving my friend preferentially *does mean* that the well-being of my friend is of a more focused concern to me, and sadly—since we are limited creatures (in time and abilities) who cannot dedicate our maximal efforts to *everyone*—it also means that I choose (by virtue of my preference which gives my friend his special status) to prioritize my friend *above* my neighbor.

Now, if Kierkegaard is unwilling to accept the appropriateness of treating the friend and the neighbor in such a different manner (and it seems that he is indeed unwilling), but still insists on maintaining that preferential love is legitimate, he has to explain what makes this *legitimate* (unselfish, neighborly) form of preferential love “preferential.” Since he does not explain this (as he does not provide an alternative account of a “legitimate” preferential love) and yet attacks preferential love in the way he does and then affirms it in the way he does, we are justified in accusing him of inconsistency.

Ferreira’s interpretation fails to address this inconsistency because the answer she gives (preferential love is allowed as long as it does not result in blindness toward the neighbor) does not tackle the problem that the situation described above posits with regard to the demand for equality. Meaning, the problem is that in spite of *not* being blind to my neighbor, loving preferentially means, necessarily, that I look differently at my friend and love him in a different (“unequal”) way from that in which I love my neighbor. The result of the demand to love in the *same* way (in the neighborly, non-preferential, equal way) all the *different* objects of love in our life, then, is that we leave no real room for the (existing) differences between preferential and non-preferential loves. Therefore, as long as neighborly love is expected to be the ruling, decisive model for love, *any love*, it is impossible to present those special loves that we call “preferential” as legitimate forms of love—as anything other than a failure to love correctly, or a distortion of correct love. Accordingly, Kierkegaard’s—and Ferreira’s—attempt to present those loves as legitimate, while insisting on taking neighborly love as the model for any love, is precisely the cause of the inconsistency in their position. Ultimately, given their insistence on *one and the same equal love for all*, it is not very clear what their suggestion—to love *both* by way of duty and preference—amounts to. How can I love my *beloved* (assuming that this is a love that is by definition preferential) by virtue of a love which is essentially and decisively non-preferential?

In answering the question that I posited in the title of this section, I would say that no, *Works of Love* does not allow equality and preference to coincide. Nonetheless, this does not mean that they cannot coincide *in principle*. *Works of Love* does not allow them to

coincide because it insists on structuring the model of love—the one true love of which all the other loves are various manifestations—in terms of self-denial and non-preferentiality. However, perhaps this is misleading. Perhaps we should think of love as being differently structured, in the shape of the *double movement of faith*. I will return to this suggestion in section three below, but first let us see how Ferreira might respond to my criticism.

### 2.3 “Our Duty to Love the People We See”: A possible response to my criticism and an answer

Although Ferreira herself uses the term “preference” when approving special loves (under the condition of not violating equality), it now seems that she objects to preference after all: “the descriptions of the fulfillment of love that begin here support the idea of an impartiality (or equal regard) that includes loving the differences (*even while it excludes preference*)” (2001, 106; my emphasis). Ferreira wants to include in *Works of Love*’s model of love a *special attention* to concreteness and differences—but at the same time she wants, in compliance with *Works of Love*, to exclude preference. She therefore limits the meaning of preference to the phenomenological fact that there are people who are closer to us than others, people “who constitute our arena for moral action” (2001, 106). She insists that the fact that proximity indeed influences the way we act (in terms of whom we give our help and attention to—and remember the example of the neighbor and the friend that I illustrated above) does not imply preference. She asks: “Does Kierkegaard’s acknowledgment of the fact that we are situated in a particular historical and spatial context amount to a disguised expression of preference that is inconsistent with equality?” (2001, 106). Ferreira answers:

In the second deliberation, as we saw, Kierkegaard claims that preference is self-loving because even if it is not selfish, it remains an expression of “self-willfulness” and “arbitrariness”. . . . In the fourth deliberation, on the contrary, the phrase “those once given or chosen,” which he repeats (pp.159, 166), explicitly excludes the dimensions of willfulness or arbitrariness that constitute the preference to be avoided [2001, 106–7].

“Once given or chosen,” then, is the logic behind the “new,” justified preference (it explains what constitutes our “arena for moral action”), and this new condition for close, “preferred” relationships substitutes the “preference to be avoided.” However, is “once given or chosen” strong enough to explain the different, special, unique commitment and love that we feel toward the people who constitute our close circle, “our arena for moral action”? What explains the “choice” (in the “once

chosen”), for example? Can the “forbidden” preference, which we are instructed “to avoid,” be taken out of the picture when we try to explain the phenomenological fact of being closer to some people than to others and of choosing some and not others?

Moreover, Ferreira emphasizes that the love discussed in *Works of Love* is sensitive to differences. From this perspective, the different loves are explained in terms of different responses to distinct objects of love:

We can assume that seeing a person as she is, if she is our daughter or wife, will mean seeing her as our daughter or wife. The particularities of the relation must make some difference in the character of our response, both in terms of what is seen to be needed by those to whom we stand in special relations and what I can more easily do for them because of proximity or greater knowledge of their situation [2001, 112].

It seems, then, that Ferreira’s answer to my criticism—a criticism that emphasizes the importance of preference for explaining the phenomenological reality in which, for example, one’s love for one’s wife is different from one’s love for one’s neighbor—could be that dismissing preferences does not entail dismissing the uniqueness and distinctiveness of different forms of love. Even though one loves without making preferences, one loves different persons distinctively and distinguishably. She refers in this context to Kierkegaard’s effective example with respect to our love of nature: “Just recollect what you yourself have so often delighted in looking at, recollect the beauty of the meadows! There is no difference in the love, no, none—yet what a difference in the flowers!” (Kierkegaard 1995, 269–70).<sup>8</sup>

However, in my view, these beautiful words capture precisely the problem I am trying to indicate. I do not claim that neighborly love is not sensitive to the differences between the distinctive objects at which it is directed; I do not claim that this love unifies all the concrete persons into one abstract object. The problem with this model of love is not that it implies sameness in the object of love (or, in Ferreira’s terms, blindness to differences and concreteness), but rather that it implies *the sameness of the love itself*. Eventually, the only explanation Ferreira offers regarding the nature of the difference in the love itself (the difference, for example, between love for one’s spouse or friend and love for one’s neighbor) is in terms of a “responsiveness to different needs.” However, is this strong enough to explain the difference between the love I feel for my romantic beloved and the love I feel for my neighbor? I think not.

<sup>8</sup> Ferreira’s reference to this quote is on 112.

Ferreira's resolution, to conclude, is therefore unsatisfactory for several reasons. To begin with, her account does not explain why the difference in roles (which from her point of view serves to explain the difference between love for neighbor and love for friend or for spouse, for example) is formed in the first place; she does not explain why some people *become* my friend or my spouse. The needs of the friend or the spouse are presumably generated, to a large extent, by the friendship itself; the friend needs *my* advice or empathy because I am his friend, and not the other way around (it is not because he needs my advice that I become his friend). Ferreira's account presupposes that a choice has been made, by me and by the other people involved (determining that this will be my friend, this my spouse), but her account cannot explain *why* this choice is made.

Now, the lack of explanation here is of course consistent with her reluctance to affirm preference, *for choice is essentially connected with preference*, with the inclinations, emotions, and personal needs of the one who chooses, the one who loves. However, Ferreira's account is entirely in terms of the other's (the object of my love) needs, and my ability to answer those needs. It leaves no room for the role of *my* needs in forming preferential relationships of love.

Finally, Ferreira's account assimilates the difference between my relations with mere neighbor and with friend or spouse to the difference between my relations with different neighbors (the king, the poor man, the sick man, and so on). In the latter case, it is perhaps plausible to describe the differences as different expressions of the same, equal attitude of love (that changes according to the neighbor's needs). However, it seems to miss something crucial to say that my love for the beloved is the same attitude (directed toward persons with different needs) as the attitude toward the neighbor. For in the case of my beloved, I not only *give* something different, I also, crucially, *want* something different (independently of my beloved's needs) from what I want in the case of the neighbor. This different wanting, this different quality and intensity of wanting, is precisely what constitutes my love for my beloved as *preferential*.

Indeed, neighborly love may be described as a way of attending to the intrinsic value of another person (the intrinsic, infinite value that all human beings share *equally*), and of responding to the needs of the other person in accordance with this recognition of her value. However, to see love for friend or romantic beloved as simply a version of this universal, equal response to the value of persons seems to ignore the nature of such preferential loves. Love for friend or romantic beloved is *not* merely a response to the intrinsic value of the other (though, of course, it should not conflict with recognizing this intrinsic value)—it involves something further. This can be addressed only when we

acknowledge the role of preference—the attention given to *my need* of companionship or to *my seeking* after a total encounter of mind and body with *this* particular person (and nobody else)—in the reality of the special loves that we have in our lives.

If one wants to give an adequate account of the nature of the special loves that are so central to our lives (romantic love, friendship, parental love), one needs to acknowledge the role of preferentiality in our existence.<sup>9</sup> Part of this acknowledgment is an *unqualified* affirmation of self-concerned sensitivities and desires. Self-concern or self-love, to recall our discussion in section 1.1, does not necessarily mean something bad. Accordingly, it is not rejected, at least not explicitly, either by Kierkegaard or Ferreira. (I am referring to self-love [c].) However, as we have just seen, there is a strong reluctance here to accept it fully. In the previous section, we saw that Kierkegaard is very unenthusiastic, to say the least, about preference, and in this section, we have seen that Ferreira goes out of her way to remove the element of preference from the model of true love. There is a deep ambivalence—in the text itself and in Ferreira’s interpretation of it—with regard to the status of what I call “full concreteness,” or “a full return to the world.”

Full concreteness is the concreteness of ourselves as one entity, *essentially* containing both our spiritual elements and our finite, bodily elements. To accept this concreteness *fully* is to rejoice not only in our spiritual connection with God (and with the neighbor) but also in our finite embodiment (intended by God) in the world. In *Works of Love*, there is an acceptance of our finitude, of our bodily existence, which necessarily entails self-focused elements such as feelings, inclinations, desires, and so forth. However, this is an unhappy acceptance (it is more like a grudging acceptance, something we have no choice but to

<sup>9</sup> This is the place to mention another recently published significant study of *Works of Love*. C. Stephen Evan’s *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love* deserves of course a separate discussion. However, as far as the problem of preferentiality is concerned, Evans, by his own admission, offers a solution close to that of Ferreira’s (2004, 205). I, therefore, do not elaborate on his reading here. At the same time, it is important in this context to emphasize his treatment of the *need* to make preferences. Evans, in contrast with Ferreira, acknowledges the decisive role of preferentiality in our lives and strongly contends that “Kierkegaard does not hold the absurd belief that I ought to have the same feelings and do precisely the same things for every human being. . . . [I]t is clear that institutions such as the family could not exist without treating some people differently than others” (2004, 199). However, despite his sensitivity to preferentiality, Evans is addressing a different problem related to it. While I ask about the nature of love when it is directed toward “preferred” persons, Evans asks about the nature of love (and the possibility of actualizing it) when it is directed toward those who are *not* part of our lives. The problem regarding the extent of our responsibility, and practical duties in relation to those who are not close to us, is a deep and pressing question that I have chosen not to discuss here; it requires a study of its own.



accept). *Works of Love*, although it never explicitly states so, grants our finite existence—in its full expression as including our bodily, self-interested needs and desires—a secondary place. Needs are solemnly respected but never joyfully celebrated. Accordingly, the account of the meaning of our existence given here is necessarily partial. The difficulty in affirming preferential love—which constitutes an important aspect of our life—is symptomatic.

At the same time, this problem must not mislead us into overlooking the deep significance of *Works of Love*. It should rather help us distinguish between Kierkegaard's important insights regarding neighborly love and his confused judgment regarding preferential love. In the last section of this essay, then, I will offer an "amendment" to the way *Works of Love* understands the model of the one true love, hoping that this may help us to resolve this confusion.

### 3. Two (Distinct) Forms of (the Same) Love<sup>10</sup>

Christianly, the entire distinction between the different kinds of love is essentially abolished [Kierkegaard 1995, 143].

Christianity . . . knows only one kind of love, the spirit's love, but this can lie at the base of and be present in every other expression of love. How wonderful! [1995, 146].

And yet it must be wonderful to get the princess, and the knight of faith is the only happy man, the heir to the finite. . . . to live happily every moment this way by virtue of the absurd, . . . —this is wonderful [1983, 50].

Let us recapitulate the problem. The picture of love that Kierkegaard depicts in *Works of Love*—as the first two quotations clearly show, and as Ferreira's attentive interpretation carefully demonstrates—can be described as follows: our life is enriched by different experiences of love, love for our romantic beloveds, love for our friends, love for members of our families, and also love for our neighbors. However, claims Kierkegaard, this multiplicity must not mislead us into thinking that there are *many* kinds of love because in essence there is only *one* kind of love, only *one true love*. This is the spirit's love, which Kierkegaard recognizes as neighborly love. At the same time, Kierkegaard does not wish to claim that the diversity of the loves we experience is only an illusion or a phenomenon we need to deny; as we saw above, he certainly wishes to affirm the existence of those various

<sup>10</sup> I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this paper whose comments and questions helped me in shaping and sharpening the main argument of this section.

loves in our life. What is the connection, then, between “the one true love” on the one hand, and the *variety* of loves on the other hand? The answer seems to be given in the second quotation. The various kinds of love are expressions of neighborly love. The one fundamental love—neighborly love—is formed differently in the context of our different experiences of special loves.

However, given the two strict demands of neighborly love as Kierkegaard characterizes it in *Works of Love*—first, to be based on *self-denial* and second, to be directed *equally* at everybody—it seems contradictory to expect neighborly love to be the ground for special loves. After all, special loves are essentially based on an *unqualified affirmation of the self* (affirmation of its inclinations, desires, wishes, preferences), which is in tension with the first demand of neighborly love, and they are also essentially *exclusive*, which is in tension with the second demand of neighborly love. If we agree with Kierkegaard’s claim regarding the “oneness” of love, and at the same time accept his account regarding the nature of this love (namely, self denial’s love directed equally at everybody), then we end up with an incompatible picture that claims to allow for the existence of special loves (namely, unqualified self-affirming, exclusive loves) but does not leave real room for them. We saw that Ferreira’s attempt to accept *Works of Love*’s model of *neighborly love*, and at the same time to account within its framework for *special loves* (in terms of their “different responses to different needs”), fails to address (and capture) the special quality of these loves. In a further essay that emphatically focuses on the validity and legitimacy of preferential (special) loves in *Works of Love* (written as a response to Alastair Hannay’s criticism of this work), Ferreira is explicit in her claim that preferential love is the same love as neighborly love, only restricted (see Ferreira 2008, 107–9). But if so, how are we to understand the special, distinctive character of preferential loves, which we know by experience to be very different (in quality, intensity, sensitivity to the self who loves) from neighborly love?

I agree with Ferreira that Kierkegaard’s insistence on neighborly love being the only kind of love is connected to his idea of *Kjerlighed* (the Danish word Kierkegaard uses when he speaks of the one, true love) as being both the love that God “placed in us” and “the neighbor-love we are commanded to express” (Ferreira 2008, 107). I also agree with her, as should be quite obvious by now, that Kierkegaard indeed affirms the legitimacy of preferential loves. Where I differ from her is in her acceptance of Kierkegaard’s account of neighborly love in *Works of Love*. In doing so, I also differ from Kierkegaard himself, but I am far from abandoning him. Rather, I suggest that we “amend” Kierkegaard’s understanding of love as it is presented in *Works of Love* by turning to

an earlier version of the Kierkegaardian voice—by using his understanding of *faith* as it is presented in *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>11</sup>

While *Works of Love* focuses on neighborly love, *Fear and Trembling*, in its portrayal of faith, posits at its center stories of preferential love. The most prominent of these is of course the story of Abraham's parental love for his son Isaac, but, as the third quotation above indicates, a romantic love story is also offered as a site for faith. Interestingly, *Fear and Trembling* demonstrates faith as the only religious-existential attitude that allows for the realization of these loves, which are presented as *impossible* loves. Against the background of their impossibility it is only the paradox of faith that makes these loves possible.<sup>12</sup> What is the paradox of faith, and how is this relevant to the problem of preferential love?

The paradox of faith refers to the ability to sustain simultaneously the two movements of faith, which seem to contradict each other. The first movement is the movement of resignation, the equivalent to *Works of Love's* "movement" or stance of self-denial. Resignation means a "dying to the world"; it means that one denies oneself, one's will, in the face of God's will. The knight of resignation accepts that his deepest and strongest desire regarding his worldly happiness (the relationship with Isaac, the love for the princess) will be denied him. In other words, performing the movement of resignation, the knight is willing to "let go" of the dearest and strongest attachments he sustains with finitude. The knight renounces finitude in the sense that he releases

<sup>11</sup> This move is not uncontroversial. *Fear and Trembling* is signed by a pseudonym (rather than by Kierkegaard himself, as *Works of Love* is) and the vision of faith presented there is later attacked by yet another pseudonym (Johannes Climacus). However, it goes far beyond the scope of this essay to address adequately the question regarding the complex relations between the signed and the pseudonymous works (as well as the no-less-complex relations between the pseudonymous works themselves). I take it to be sufficient, for the purpose of this essay, that Kierkegaard acknowledged that he was the author of *Fear and Trembling*: it is a good enough justification for ascribing the ideas in *Fear and Trembling* to him and, accordingly, for using them to shed light on his later ideas. Another interpreter who suggests understanding the dialectic of *Works of Love* in terms of *Fear and Trembling's* double movement of faith is Kjell Eyvind Johansen in his essay "The Problem of Knowledge in the Ethics of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*" (1994). For readings that contrast between the model of love (and faith) of *Works of Love* and that of *Fear and Trembling*, see Jackson 1999; Hall 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham trusts that his love relationship with his son will persist while accepting the decree that his son should be sacrificed, and similarly the young lad, if he is a knight of faith, is capable of trusting the realization of his love for the princess despite seeing "the sword hanging over [her] head" (Kierkegaard 1983, 50). I elaborate on the meaning of the impossibility of these loves, as well as on the meaning of the *paradox* of faith in view of this impossibility, in Krishek 2006.

his hold of finitude, as it were. He affirms that nothing belongs to him (but rather to God) and thereby accepts the essential impossibility of sustaining a secure (and therefore joyful, delightful, satisfying) relationship with the finite.

The second movement of faith can be termed as the movement of repetition (though Kierkegaard does not use this term in *Fear and Trembling*). This movement is performed *together with the first movement of resignation* and its meaning is the ability (while still renouncing finitude) to receive back, or rather *affirm*, finitude. That is, faith is the affirmation of one's relationship with finitude (be it Isaac or the princess or anything else); it refers to one's hold on finitude, the ability to find joy and hope and meaning in finitude, against the background of releasing—of renouncing or denying—the hold on it.<sup>13</sup>

This paradoxical attitude of faith explains the “wonderfulness” in the existence of *Fear and Trembling's* knight of faith (see again the quotation above). From within the painful movement of resignation and self-denial, he joyfully affirms his relationship with finitude. In *Works of Love*, on the other hand, Kierkegaard explains the highest stance of existence in terms of self-denial alone. Accordingly, his ambivalence toward self-love and preferential love reflects his reluctance to affirm the second movement of faith: he “neglects” the movement of repetition and “forgets” *Fear and Trembling's* joyful return to finitude. Unqualified, proper self-love (self-love [c]) as well as the preferential loves based on it are the clearest manifestation of the second movement, of an unrestricted affirmation of our relation to finitude—it is a manifestation of a wholehearted affirmation of what I termed above our “full concreteness.” It is not surprising, then, that together with his “forgetfulness” of the second movement, Kierkegaard also fails to fully affirm self-love and preferential love.

Thus, while in *Fear and Trembling* neither movement (the first movement of resignation/self-denial and the second movement of repetition/affirmation) comes at the expense of the other, as it were, in *Works of Love* Kierkegaard seems to fail at seeing the possibility of such a harmony between them. It seems that he gives priority to the movement of resignation, and allows for only a partial, hesitant return to finitude. This partial return is expressed in his willingness to gladly affirm only a qualified, proper self-love (self-love [b]), and the love for the other based on it—that is, the love for one's neighbor. The result, as I demonstrated above, is a tension in Kierkegaard's position with regard to those loves that exceed self-love [b]'s qualified interest in the self—the special, preferential loves, based on self-love [c].

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed explanation of resignation, repetition, and the paradox of faith, see chapters two and three in Krishek 2006.

Therefore, for solving this tension, I suggest a different understanding of the one true love that is the basis for *all* the different forms of love<sup>14</sup>—that is, a different understanding of *Kjerlighed*. Rather than understanding it as structured in the shape of self-denial alone, as Kierkegaard seems to be doing in *Works of Love* (“Christian love is self-denial’s love”), I suggest that we understand it in terms of the double movement of faith. In other words, I suggest that we understand *Kjerlighed* (the one true love) as structured in the shape of self-denial (resignation) and unqualified self-affirmation (repetition) tied paradoxically together. This basic double structure of *Kjerlighed* allows the realization of both neighborly love and preferential love, as well as their coexistence. Let us see how this works.

The formation of the double movement of *Kjerlighed* into the shape of neighborly love is expressed in a feeling that can justly be demanded to be directed at everybody equally. This loving feeling amounts to a respect for the otherness of the neighbor and to a recognition of his value, accompanied by a feeling of compassion, and by the genuine interest in his well-being. How does the double movement function here? The first movement is expressed in my *duty* to see the neighbor as an equal, to “deny” (renounce) myself and focus my attention on the neighbor. Through resignation and self-denial I see that the neighbor is an equal who deserves my respect and my acknowledgment of his independent value. Indeed, to see the neighbor as an equal means genuinely to see him. It means that when he is there before me—the stranger asking for change in the street, or my colleague who might have done me wrong in the past but now seeks my help, or my friend with whom I am having a heated quarrel—I see him, out of self-denial, as my neighbor, as my equal, as a human being like myself, not as a stranger who has nothing to do with me, not as a bad-tempered colleague who has done me wrong, not as a friend who is hurting my feelings at the moment, but rather as a neighbor. To see, in all of these instances and in many others, the neighbor is an act of resignation and self-denial because it forces me to set my self (not to mention my ego) aside, to renounce my own personal opinions and inclinations, my personal preoccupations, my thoughts and plans that are focused on my self—and in this vacuum to put, as it were, the neighbor. Now this attitude deserves to be called *love* due to the second movement. This movement is expressed precisely in the tender compassion implied by this attitude, in *my emotional involvement* in this situation (of encountering the neighbor). Even if it is only a limited involvement, I would

<sup>14</sup> I use the term “form” as distinguished from “kind” in order to emphasize the possibility of the *same* love receiving *different manifestations* and accordingly shaped in *distinct forms*.

still feel pain (and responsibility) when witnessing a neighbor's suffering, and I would feel genuine joy and satisfaction if I managed to contribute to the neighbor's well-being. When *Kjerlighed* is directed at a neighbor, then, it is formed in the shape of a feeling of compassion and concern that drives me to act for the benefit of the neighbor. This feeling must indeed be directed at everybody equally.

However, among my many neighbors whom I love in a neighborly way, there are some—special, preferred, chosen neighbors—whom I love in a different, unique way. This way of loving is constituted (as different and unique) by the attention to my inclinations, to my preferences, to my desires, and to my idiosyncratic wishes, aspirations, and hopes—all these features that can be legitimately affirmed only in the context of the second movement that fully accepts our finitude. The formation of the double movement of *Kjerlighed* into the shape of preferential love, then, is expressed in a feeling that in addition to the neighbor-love element in it includes sensitivity to the special preferences and inclinations of the self who loves.

In sum, to return to the question that I posited at the beginning of this essay—can neighborly love be at the same time preferential?—I can now answer that yes, it can, but only as long as this question is understood as implying the possibility of the *coexistence* of two forms of love (neighborly and preferential). One can love one's spouse (for example) both in a neighborly way and in a preferential way, and in that sense one's love, when directed at one's spouse, can indeed be at the same time both neighborly and preferential. However, this statement makes sense only if we understand the "one love" (*Kjerlighed*) in terms of the *double movement of faith*, thus allowing for this fundamental love to be shaped into the two distinct forms of love (neighborly and preferential) that can coexist with each other. Only this understanding of Kierkegaardian love makes real room for the reality, and legitimacy, of preferential love—only then can we fully affirm it, and acknowledge its importance to our human existence.

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